

# THE SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF THE NATION: MILITARISED IDENTITY AND BELONGING IN SYRIAN NATIONALIST SONGS

## Abstract

This paper investigates how women are perceived in the symbolic construction of the nation. It examines national songs as integral parts of identity-making in this stage of state consolidation in Syria. Moreover, in investigating the relationship between the construction of masculinist national identity and the perpetuation of nationalist songs after the ascendance of the Ba'ath regime, this paper will use nationalist songs as an arena that reflects the marginalisation of Syrian women in public culture. Hence, this paper is concerned with the conceptualisation of the nation as an “imagined listening community” (Anderson, 2006) harnessed through aural production of nationalist songs as a means of political domination, while at the same time perpetuating symbols of hierarchy and masculinism.

## Introduction

Perhaps one of the most compelling questions surrounding the Syrian war lies in how it has unravelled the complex relationship between women and the Syrian nation. Amidst the excessive violence that has spread across all of Syria, questions about how the nation is constructed and constituted in Syrian national songs, and how in turn women have been constructed in such narrative, are subsided. This paper aims at contextualising the origin of militarism and masculinism prior to the current Syrian war in order to highlight how masculinised national ideology coupled with centralised militarism, has maintained and reinforced women subordination since 1970s.

Since Syria is a mosaic of ethnicities, religions and sects, the relationship between these divided identities has not always been easy. The only glue that has kept them united before 2011 is state-sponsored nationalism. This paper is a critical assessment of that binding identity orchestrated by the state and imposed from above. The argument, which is systematically developed on this basis, is that national symbolism is conceived as a perpetuated form of political behaviour, propagated, maintained and reinforced in the context of establishing and modernising the state. To conceptualise national symbolism as a form of politics is to relate the state to the objectives of obtaining and using power and domination. Power, in this context, is principally about “control of state” (Bruilly, 1993: 1). In essence, this paper investigates the role of national songs in excluding half of Syria (i.e. women).

While the state is the political embodiment of the nation, national symbols are particularly crucial in the process of transforming the nation into a state (Geisler, 2005: xv). In this sense, I aim to bring into sharper focus the various ways in which state actors deploy symbols to reinforce a masculinist national identity. To do this, in defining national symbols, this study examines national songs and flag as integral parts of identity –making, and agents of, gender boundaries.

In the process of identifying the intersection of masculinism and national symbolism in the state-consolidation stage, this paper will use nationalist songs as an arena that reflects the missing representation of Syrian women in the official narrative of public culture. Moreover, while a number of studies have analysed the role of nationalist songs and their relevance to nation-building projects (Vaughan Williams, 1963; Brincker, 2014; Bohlman, 2004), I seek to add to this literature by showing how nationalist songs reinforce masculinism in the Syrian culture. In the Syrian context, Wedeen's study (1999) of the symbolic production of political culture analysed auditory, written and visual symbols. Despite her study encompassing a great variety of cultural and political symbolism, such as ceremonies, marches, monuments, newspaper, plays, TV series, slogans and caricatures, it did not consider nationalist songs as part of the official cult used by the Ba'ath regime. More importantly, her study disregarded the important role of Syrian political symbolism in producing gendered national identity.

This paper's point of departure is to consider nationalist songs as an important part of Syrian oral culture. This is because nationalist songs are premeditated to construct a particular perception of national belonging and identity. At the same time, Gilbert's recent study (2013) of the role of national symbols in marking the political transition of Syria before and after the 2011 uprising omitted the role of national symbols, particularly nationalist songs, in reinforcing masculinism in Syrian public culture. Thus, the scholarly literature that tackled national symbolism in Syria such as Wedeen's (1999) and Gilbert's (2013) ignored nationalist songs and, more importantly, did not investigate their role in reinforcing masculinism and gender bias. While in the final stages of writing this study, the publication of Miriam Cooke's book *Dancing in Damascus* (2017) brought a novel approach to the role of symbolism in creating Syria as a nation. Despite her book tackling Syria during the revolution, the fact that a considerable part of it discusses popular music is a starting point for

advancing the studies on song in Syrian culture and its role in formulating the sense of national identity. However, Cooke did not approach these songs from a gendered perspective and whether women were visible in their narrative.

More importantly, since no study has contemplated the exclusion of women from the culture of nationalist songs, such explicit omission of women shows that this discourse is a fundamentally male-centric construction (see Morra, 2014; Bassiouney, 2008).<sup>1</sup> Hence, this paper is concerned with the conceptualisation of nation as an “imagined listening community” (Anderson, 2006: 149) harnessed through aural production of nationalist songs as a means of persuasion and coercion.

### Setting the stage: Definitions and conceptions

Before embarking on analysing the construction of masculinism in the Syrian nationalist songs, the following subsections aim to set the stage for discussion and provide a common language for reading this paper. In this sense, I shall provide some working definitions of the most used terms and how they are associated with nationalism in a system of interplaying power relations. As the nationalist songs in this paper argue, national belonging and identity are intertwined with what Bauer called “ego” (Bauer, 1996 [1924]: 36). Yet this ego is constructed as inseparable from the ethos of *masculinism*, *masculinity* and *patriarchy*. Because nationalism is the constructed ideology that invokes and perpetuates a particular group identity that interplays with hierarchy and authority, this intimacy between construction of the nation and creating the ideal image of the man in the national narrative is evidenced in the perpetuation of *masculinism*, *masculinity* and gender bias with which they are categories that reify national belonging and identity.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the inclusion of women in such studies does not mean that these texts are not male centric.

In order to understand how this intimate relationship between masculinity and the nation is perpetuated, there is a need to provide definitions of important categories that act as dominoes for constructing the identity frame of Syrians. In fact, this paper employs two sets of categories – gender and masculinism, and militarism and hierarchy – as the bare bones of each song in this paper. However, there are parallel subcategories across this set that will be measured by their relationship to the construction of national belonging and identity in national narratives.

### **Masculinity as a domino**

The fact that there has been no consensus on what constitutes being masculine because its meaning varies in relation to class, race and national setting, scholars have agreed that masculinity is about an identifiable characteristic that sets the ideals and norms for male demeanour (Connell, 1995). This paper uses the notion “masculinity” as an analytical tool for investigating the subordinate position of women in Syrian national songs. The use of this concept aims to encompass several dimensions, and this paper will broaden “masculinity” as a corporeal domino for hierarchy, military and manliness. Thus, “masculinity” is the appropriation of certain sets of modes and practices that incite hierarchy and domination of one sex over the other.

Conceptualising masculinity as culturally constructed is intimately linked with the formulation of nationalism. Balaji and Hughson concur that the “cultural production of masculinity has long been tied to nationalistic subtexts” (2014: 207). So, in this context, it is about the domination of certain traits over the other, which are connoted with strength, power, domination and sacrifice.

The internalisation of masculinity in the national narrative normalises hegemony and hierarchy, which significantly perpetuates notions of power relations and order. In this sense,

the notion of hierarchy in this study carries two meanings. First, it highlights the superiority of masculinity in defining national identity and belonging, which in turn reinforces women's subordination. Second, hierarchy is connoted with the elevation of militarism, which also implies the glorification of man's heroism and physical strength. According to these two meanings, women are perceived as subordinate and their membership in national memory is obscured. In the Syrian context, hierarchy is manifested in the interaction between the creation of masculinity and the nation, which is enhanced by the perpetuation of militarised belonging and identity.

This relationship between militarism and national narrative defines muscular nationalism, which is identified with the commemoration of the sacrificial heroism of men. This view of masculinity is reinforced in the construction of the ideal image of manhood juxtaposed with passive femininity. Banerjee defines muscular nationalism as

the intersection of a specific vision of masculinity with the political doctrine of nationalism. Examples of muscular nationalism center an adult male body poised to sacrifice and kill for the nation. Usually, this view of masculinity is juxtaposed with a chaste female body that both symbolizes national honor and provides a moral code for the lives of women in the nation. (2016: 2)

This constructed gendered binary will be reflected in the Syrian national songs between the patriarchal father/heroic warrior and the passive woman/nation. Such gendered categorisation foregrounds the essentialist perceptions of women as passive followers in the private sphere and inadequate political personhoods in the public sphere. Moreover, these constructed ideals of chaste femininity will be reinforced in these nationalist songs through reinforcing the dominance of the patriarchal figure in the family and the leader in the state. As Banerjee says, "muscular nationalism generally centres a gendered binary – martial man versus chaste woman" (2016: 2). This perception negotiation is further contextualised within the symbolic

construction of the nation, which constructs the man as the heroic fighter who will protect the woman and the fatherland.

The elaboration of this dualism underlies the construction of muscular national identity and its juxtaposition, with the configuration of women as a canvas of passivity and subordination. This leads us to the second subcategory of masculinity: hegemony. The use of hegemonic masculinity in the Syrian national context is best defined by Connell, as “the culturally idealised form of masculine character” (1990: 83), connected to “toughness and competitiveness” and, more importantly, to “the subordination of women” (ibid.: 94). This notion of masculinity becomes hegemonic when its ethos and values become naturalised in a given culture. As Connell notes, a certain form of masculinity is hegemonic when “its exaltation stabilizes a structure of dominance and oppression in the gender order as a whole. To be culturally exalted, the pattern of masculinity must have exemplars who are celebrated as heroes” (ibid.: 94).

Such masculinised ideals are predominant in the Syrian songs as forms of identity and belonging become manifested in realising hegemonic masculinity which is “naturalised in the form of the hero”. The predominance of realising heroism in these songs resides in constructing models of strong military men ready to sacrifice themselves for the nation, revive its glorious past and transmit its language and history. More importantly, *hegemonic masculinity* is about *competing masculinities*; in other words, it is a manifestation of hierarchical order and power relations among men themselves. Thus, it highlights the constructed boundaries between superior and inferior men based on physical strength. These nationalised versions of masculinity propagated in the Syrian national songs have been employed to constitute a martialised definition of national identity and belonging that encompasses physical strength, prowess and bravery as sets of identifiers. These become the contours of a masculinised nation that enforces the perpetuation of masculinised subjects.

The version of muscular nationalism analysed in this paper demonstrates the way achieving masculinity is an integral part of the birth of the nation-state.

Thus, hegemonic masculinity and elevation of masculinist traits form the basis of Syrian national thought as the association between Syrian nationalism and hegemonic masculinity is identified by two ideal types that prevail in the cultural narrative. First, the Ba'athist warrior model – the male warrior who is ready to sacrifice himself for the nation and is perceived as superior to other males who are not ready to do this. In this model, there is a hierarchical division among men cast as active versus passive males. This activism associated with militarism and soldierly values defines national identity as based on the readiness to die for the nation. Second is the patriarchal model, which emphasises that language and history are defined by the heroic deeds of men. This is the more domesticated, patriarchal Ba'athist model that is rooted in the portrayal of Hafez al-Assad as the leader and father of the nation and further configures Bashar al-Assad as the masculine lover who allegorises the dominant relationship between the male and female in the private sphere.

In this sense, hegemonic masculinity promotes the identification of the ideals of the citizen-warrior and Ba'athi militant, which in turn underlies the juxtaposition between citizenship and Ba'athism on the one hand and physical power, strength and manliness on the other. Ahlbäck illustrates the definitions of the concepts of manhood and manliness, stating that manhood becomes normalised by soldiering, while “manliness became associated with discipline, heroism, death and sacrifice in battle” (2016: 9). This discourse of masculinity is also evidenced in nationalist songs, which associate the sacrificial heroism of military men and the feminised land/women that needs men's protection, on the one hand, and the patriarchal configuration of the two Presidents Hafez and Bashar al-Assad on the other.



Other modes of subjugation that masculinity reinforces in its relationship to nationalism is *patriarchy*. Despite patriarchy coming in a variety of forms that can prevail in the public and private spheres (see Walby, 1990), for the purpose of this study the use of the notion of patriarchy is confined to the familial domain that symbolises the “father rule” (Bradley, 1989: 55). “Patriarchy” will therefore be used to refer to women’s subordination in the family domain, in the cult of the two presidents. Therefore, this paper argues that it is the normalisation of masculinist traits cherished by militarism that subsequently problematises national belonging and identity, as they become based on hegemony and hierarchy.

### **National symbols and nation-building**

Over the past three decades, scholarly literature has taken an increasing interest in investigating the role of national symbols in the production of national identities (Smith, 2001). Smith’s conception of national identity as constructed by the “continuous reproduction and reinterpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations” (2001: 18) draws our attention to the role of national symbols as particularly useful agents for shaping and identifying the nation. That national identity is subject to a constant process of reinvention and reconstruction is synonymous with the conceptualisation of the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006).

This symbolic conceptualisation of the nation takes us to Anderson’s idea of an imagined entity in which he demonstrates that the transition from imagining the nation to realising it, culturally and politically, requires enhancing a set of social and political practices that formulate a sense of collectivity and nationhood. Nonetheless, McClintock has a rather more elaborate conception of the term “imagined communities”, as she states that nations cannot be limited to fictitious connotations of sentiments and experiences but, rather, they “are elaborate social practices enacted through time, laboriously fabricated through the media

... [and] the myriad forms of popular culture” (1991: 104). Imbued by a particular nationalist project in a given state, I will use auditory media articulated in nationalist songs as national symbols that maintain power relations and reflect the masculinist national narrative propagated by the Ba’ath regime.

That said, it is not enough to highlight that the nation is a constructed entity based on some sort of fictitious shared past and present; rather, it is a dynamic creation that changes through time (Bauer, 1996 [1924]), so symbols are updated regularly to reflect this change. This understanding of the nation is as a product of an imaginative ordering of experiences selectively reconstructed through the symbolism that denotes them. The related questions are how such emphasis on particular experiences emblematised in national symbols produces specific narratives of national belonging and identity, and whether this selectivity in recreating national experiences is geared to the promotion of particular nationalist conceptions full of references to masculinism, patriarchy and hierarchy.

Answering these questions is closely linked with throwing light on the role of national symbols in creating boundaries. As Cohen argues, the community is “a boundary expressing symbol” that is uniquely constructed through the manipulation of its symbols (1995: 16). Symbols allow for the possibility to create meaning and further emphasise that collective identity is not static, but rather can be connoted with different meanings through the employment of symbols.

### **Perpetuating the nation through nationalist songs**

Syria is an especially interesting case to study the role of national symbolism in revealing the politics of domination, authority and coercion (Wedeen, 1999; Gilbert, 2013). While nation and state are not synonymous, in Syria’s self-prescribed Ba’ath regime they have been conflated, and supporting the Ba’ath Party and belonging to the nation are understood to be

the same. While nationalist songs have been used in many Arab contexts, their use has been to legitimise and consolidate the authority of these regimes by invoking the heroic past of these nations along with configuring struggle as a means to maintain internal stability.

Moreover, given the prominence of emphasising the cultural identity of the nation in the Syrian narrative (Aldoughli, 2016; 2017), nation-building has been symbolised in the rhetoric of these nationalist songs. Thus, being an integral part of the Ba'athist state's agency to institute modes of cultural and political communication, Syrian symbolism ensures the reification of the abstracted nation. As Wedeen significantly notes, "[t]he power of the Syrian state resides not only in its ability to control material resources and to construct institutions of punishment, but also in its ability to manage the symbolic world" (1999: 32). In addition, Syrian nationalist songs as a form of oral media employed by the Ba'ath regime have always been a powerful tool in inculcating a strong sense of national consciousness. They form the core of self-perception and how one is positioned in relation to the nation. Playing a pivotal role in indoctrinating the young generation, nationalist songs are considered a normal part of the educational process in schools, wherein children are forced to memorise them to be sung on national holidays. The Ba'ath Party, with its nationalistic project, confuses the abstracted conception of the nation with the state. Syrian nationalism is therefore reiterated through these songs, which act as a medium to deliver Ba'athist propaganda (see Birdsall, 2012: 42).

### **Nationalist songs as agents of masculinism and patriarchy**

Considering the above, the power in imposing this particular set of symbols was the Ba'ath regime, which popularised nationalist songs in order to mythicise shared experiences of national members, emphasise legitimacy and control, and recreate national memory. What concerns us here is two questions. First, how did these songs construct the notion of "people" in their narrative and were women part of this group identity? And second, what role did these songs play in the creation of a masculinist national identity in the Syrian culture as a

whole? The attempt to answer these questions will further our understanding of the relationship between identity, nationalism and patriotic songs in general and also yield insights into the intricate ways in which patriotic songs reinforce the shaping of a masculinist national identity.

By the same token, these nationalist songs were also part of the dominant culture in Syria that regenerates history in its narrative. In fact, while it is common among all nations to be products of conflict and struggle, the Ba'ath regime chooses to recreate the nation within these songs by reinforcing its glorious past, struggle and sacrifice. At the same time, the conception of the nation as an “imagined sound” (Anderson, 2006: 149) that cherishes militarised ethos and masculinist values will unmask the omission of Syrian women from both nationalist songs and narratives. As Geisler states, “patriotic and revolutionary songs ... are used to reinforce the idea of blood sacrifice in the name of the nation” (2005: xxiv).

Because these songs form the ideological position that reflects the politics of power and dominance, the investigation examines how women are perceived in patriotic songs and the corresponding impact on the construction of national membership; and aims to negotiate the constructed gendered boundaries between “us” and “them”. McClintock states that women as “figurative representations symbolically define the limits of national difference and power between men. ... women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit” (1993: 62). The normalisation of militarism, masculinity and physical power in these songs is intimately linked with the sense of identity. In school, they were thrust on us every morning and during break time. Presumably, the Ba'ath regime thought that by forcing students to memorise these songs they were inculcating and strengthening our sense of nationhood. However, to me, they were in fact consolidating gendered boundaries within the national community, its power relations based on masculinism and hierarchy. Moreover, given that Syria is depicted in these songs as in a state

of danger and in need of protection, such configuration of the man as defender and warrior subsequently portrays the nation as a woman (Peterson, 1988: 44).

### **Masculinising national love and belonging in the Syrian songs**

Conceptualising the nation as a cultural construct naturalises national love and belonging. Within this primordial conception of the nation, national love is conceived as a substitute for familial love in which it is compared to a child's love for his mother (Aldoughli, 2017). However, this definition of national love becomes part of an enforced and naturalistic sentiment that generates propaganda of an ideal image of the man. More importantly, national love constitutes a means of legitimising dying for the nation, which is in turn embedded with gendered interpretations of national belonging. The normalisation of militarism, masculinity and physical power in these songs is intimately linked with the sense of identity.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, defining patriotic belonging and masculinity is manifested by conceptualising the nation as a fraternity, descending from one father and solidarity between the "brothers" (al-Husri, 1985: 35). The paradoxical nature of considering the nation as a family is that such a notion perpetuates gender hierarchy by reinforcing supremacy of the male patriarch within both family and nation (McClintock, 1993: 63). Moreover, men are depicted as the ones that guard and preserve the nation, thereby intimately linking the conception of the nation with constructing physically strong men. Hence, while the definition of nationalism is demonstrated only through familial love, this love can only be accomplished in masculine terms where men are patriots and great soldiers of the nation. In line with the foregoing, the following songs will capture the main tenets of the Syrian national narrative manifested in defining national belonging and love, identity, history and education (militarism) as prerequisites for nation formation.

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<sup>2</sup> In school, they were thrust on us every morning and during break time.

*Rāyatik bil-ʿĀli ya Sourīya* (Your Flags Are Forever High, Oh Syria)

Your flags are forever high, oh Syria.  
Your dear earth is always guarded and protected, oh Syria.  
Your dignity [ʿīzik], glory [*majdik*], flag [ʿalamik] and name [ʿismik]  
Are symbols of eternity, oh Syria.

From the title of this song, one can discern the function of the flag as a marker of the nation's glory. Nonetheless, this glory is closely linked to men's ability to guard and preserve the nation. This action of protecting and guarding the fatherland is defined by the highness of the Syrian flag, which subsequently patriarchalises belonging and identity.

You are my land and my country, oh the best of countries.  
You are my eternal love, oh the sun that shines tenderness.  
It is we who have used to protect you, our fatherland,  
Against all the betrayals and stabs of the time.

The metaphor of the “sun that shines tenderness” associates the mother's love with “eternal love” for the fatherland. The nation is constructed as a mother that pours tenderness upon those who protect the fatherland, the heroic fighters. Such a notion of a mother-son relationship underscores enforced belonging, and military sacrifice as a prerequisite for such national love and belonging. Moreover, the use of the pronoun “we” is associated with the readiness to die, so this song is addressed to a community exclusively of men.

The following words illustrate the comparison of familial love and national love that stresses the primordial belonging to the nation:

We opened our eyes learning to love and build you.  
We have grown up learning to be proud of you.  
We raised our flags so high, oh Syria,  
And for you we sang and composed poetry, oh Syria.

National love becomes exemplified in the journey of growing up and the primordial sensations first experienced between mother and son. The naturalness of this love is accompanied by the sense of action in building the fatherland, which is associated with

action, strength and dignity, all masculinist traits. The mother–son metaphor underlying the concept of nation appears in fraternal guise as a union of fighters effectively forming the basis of collective solidarity. Hence, the close association between carrying the Syrian flag with dignity and glory is measured by men’s readiness to protect the nation.

*Biktub 'Tsmik ya Blādi* (I Engrave Your Name, Oh My Country)

On the sun that never sets,  
I engrave your name, oh my country.  
Neither my love for money nor it for my children  
Would exceed my love for you.

The metaphor of engraving the name of the fatherland on the sun once again emphasises its everlasting glory and is an expression of love for the nation, yet this love is measured by the man’s readiness to sacrifice both his money and his children. The final line of the verse expresses deep love for the nation that is incomparable to any other sort of love. This metaphor resembles the man–woman love relationship, which is based on coercion and hierarchy. The patriarchalisation of national love is further intensified in the following excerpt:

Oh, my country, the most faithful of all countries,  
Poems are written for you, and you deserve them.  
May you eternally be shining and planted with glory and laureate.<sup>3</sup>  
... With their swords glowing, while your sun never sets.  
No love like your love

The romanticisation of national love is exemplified in writing poems to the fatherland. However, this expression of love is identified with the masculine: the “glory and laureate” of men fighters, and the glowing swords as an allegory of men’s physical strength. In fact, this allegory goes beyond the expression of national love, constructing man as the only representative of the nation and the only one that deserves national membership. Moreover, the depiction of the sun (as never setting) to refer to the glorious deeds of men and their

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<sup>3</sup> “Laureate” is a symbol of victory.

physical strength (with their swords glowing) conceptualises a nation composed of hierarchical order. The song ends by reaffirming the superiority of national love and the impossibility of comparing it to any other form of love. It is as if women are not only overlooked in this song, but also not even conceived as members of the nation. Hence, nation becomes a fraternity composed of brotherly solidarity.

**Commented [A1]:** 1.The genesis and reception of these songs is quite different. Maybe worth mentioning.

#### *Sourīya yā Habeebatī* (Oh, My Beloved Syria)

From the title of this song, one can discern a powerful personification of fatherland as a female lover. As the first verse reads:

(Oh, my Beloved Syria)  
You have brought me back my dignity.  
You have brought me back my identity,  
Oh, my beloved Syria.  
By war and struggle [*kifāh*], by the blazing fore of the wounds,  
The way towards freedom is lighted,  
Oh, my beloved.

Syria is portrayed as a mistress, which in turn conceives the speaker as a male with authority and domination over his lover.<sup>4</sup> This shift from portraying the nation as a mother to a female lover still reflects the transmission of patriarchy and coercion from the private to the public sphere. According to the second line, there is an association between this expression of love towards the fatherland and the retrieving of “dignity” and “identity”, which is associated with sharing the experience of war, struggle and suffering. In this sense, the process of identity construction is synonymous with active participation in war. These three notions of war, suffering and struggle are major tenets in the construction of Syrian nationalism that recur in this song to reinforce how national dignity and identity are bound to masculinist connotations.

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that the Syrian regime is not different from other Arab regimes that (sometimes) used the same lyrics to justify their oppression and dictatorship. The configuration of national battles and struggles in these songs highlight not only the process of masculinisation of national identity and belonging in the Syrian context but has also reinforced authoritarianism as these songs portray the nation in danger and in need for masculine protection.



The second excerpt enhances this masculinist construction of national belonging and identity through the celebration of men's heroic actions:

Our ... sky and land  
Are all sacrificed for and protected.  
Our blood is sacrificed for them all,  
And our heroes protect them all.  
Our Ba'ath goes on forward  
To achieve its great glory,  
Auguring well for my return,  
Preserving my great dignity,  
And renewing my identity.

These lines establish a profound association between dignity, identity and physical prowess, by emphasising the sacrifices of male heroes, and enhanced by achieving the ideal image of the Ba'athist man. As in the following lines, the reference to the Ba'ath Party that will lead the country forward depends on men's achievements. This is in line with the Ba'ath ideology, which considers the party's achievement synonymous with constructing an ideal image of the man. The party's realisation of great glory will be the only way to ensure the preservation of dignity and the renewal of identity, exclusively to men fighters. This furthers the symbolic elevation of the Ba'ath ideology, wherein "heroes" are prototyped as representatives and guardians of the nation.

This exclusiveness of national belonging to encompass only heroic men can be traced in the following lines:

Now, now and only now I am an Arab,  
I have the right to my father's name.  
"Who is your father?" I may be asked.  
"Who is your father?"  
He is the bullet of a gun,  
That achieves freedom for the proud nation,  
Oh, my beloved.

These lines clearly associate heroism with national belonging and identity. As the first line indicates, the grateful expression that "only now" can the fighter reclaim the name of his father after his heroic deeds is connected with the question of who deserves the name of his

father. This fraternity can only be realised by the bullet of a gun, which in turn stands for action and militarism. Moreover, this repetition of “who is my father?” is doubly significant as it emphasises the paternal lineage of both the nation and the family, and consequently legitimises patriarchal authority and domination in the national imagining. More importantly, the expression “now I have the right to my father’s name” indicates the right of citizenship. This in turn reflects the prejudice of Syrian laws against women, as they are not permitted to pass their nationality to foreign spouses, or to the children of such a marriage. In this cultural spectrum, belonging and membership are correlated not only primarily with heroism and chivalry, but also with patriarchy.

The following lines continue to associate national identity and belonging with masculinist values, and the extensive use of masculinist and militaristic references is evidenced in the creation of an image of sensational action:

The course of action has not yet finished, oh our nation  
Till our usurped land is returned.  
The orphaned daughter of the exodus is living in tents,  
Calling, “Oh, beloved Syria”

The vocabulary used, such as “action”, “now” and “bullets”, is consonant with constructing a masculinist ethos that defines national belonging and identity. This convergence between action and freeing the land inculcates a monolithic perception of national struggle as measured by men’s sacrifices and actions. More importantly, the dominant image of the orphaned daughter in exodus captures the loss of patriarchal leadership in both the family and the nation; her suffering is doubled as she has lost her land and her father, her home and her nation. The feminisation of the nation captured in the image of the helpless daughter in the tent portrays male fighters as heroic. Such a symbiotic relationship between helplessness and heroism naturalises the dominant binary opposition of passive females/active males. This will further create a god-like image of those male warriors who, by their militant actions to protect

this daughter, are rescuing both the familial and the national spheres. Hence, this juxtaposition of active men and passive women reinforces an essentialist perception of women's roles in both the private and the public spheres.

#### **The masculinisation of identity, memory and history**

As already explored, national symbols are utilised to convey particular nationalist myths or morals. This can be seen in the re-emphasis on history as a marker of national identity and definer of national belonging and boundaries. The use of the past reinforces legitimacy and emphasises the existence of national identity over time. In this sense, history becomes a constructed entity that bestows particular meanings. The image of the man in this narrative becomes associated with reinforcing militarism, physical strength and chivalry, thereby accumulating a selective history defined by the heroic deeds of men only. In light of the foregoing, the conceptions of memory, history and identity are reinforced in the Syrian public discourse as manifested in the following song.

#### **'Ana Sourī w 'Ārdī 'Arābiya (I Am Syrian and My Fatherland is Arab)**

This song reinforces the masculinist construction of language and identity by subjecting them to the definition of glorious past (*majd*). While the construction of the glorious past is premised on contextualising the man as the ideal representative of the nation, women are overlooked from national struggle and their sacrifices are written out of national memory. In the first excerpt, the song affirms the identity of the fatherland by emphasising its Arabic language:

I am Syrian and my Fatherland is Arab  
My sky, my fatherland, and my water are glorious ...

We can see from the first line the emphasis on the importance of language in formulating the cultural identity of the nation. This emphasis on conceptualising language as the main definer

of the nation begs the question whether the first pronoun is gender-inclusive. The second excerpt answers this:

I swear and my pledge will be witnessed that I will sacrifice myself for the glory of my flag  
The eagle is still flying high hugging your glory, oh Syria

First, the legitimacy of this belonging is stressed by a religious pledge that is accommodated by realising national glory through physical sacrifice. In fact, the use of this normalises and rationalises gender hierarchy. The inclusion of religion in inculcating national identity blocks any questioning of this masculinist belonging and further legitimises men's authority in both the private and the public sphere. This construction of enforced belonging is coupled with the image of the eagle hugging the glory of the nation. While this emphasises the glory of the nation, it also creates a hallowed image of the male hero that preserves and defends this glory. More importantly, the reference to the flag as a symbol of the nation's glory is intimately linked with men's readiness to die for the fatherland.

#### **Perpetuating militarism**

In the Syrian context, militarism is conceived as part of the educational system as a means of maintaining group identity and affiliation: the army, as a representative of the nation, structures the politics of inclusion and exclusion in the national community. While the association between militarism, masculinity and nationalism marks the interplay of male authority and dominance, the incorporation of such notions in Syrian public discourse socialises the image of the male soldier as part of the predominant mainstream in Syrian culture. This in turn reinforces hierarchy and hegemonic masculinity as measured by men's physical strength. This normalisation of militarism in Syrian national narrative is reflected in the following song.

### *Sāff al- 'Āskar* (The Line of Soldiers)

The conceptualisation of the army as an extension of the education system promotes national ideology based on coercion and hegemony. This normalisation of militarism in the Syrian context is reflected in the title of this song, which celebrates an image of strength and activity. As the first excerpt reads:

Teach [ 'ālemnī] me to fight [ *nharib*], oh soldiers [ 'āsqa]  
Using the gun and the cannon.  
Here I am, my land of grandfathers  
If duty once called upon.  
So witness and hear, oh mountains;  
Here I am, ready! my land of grandfathers.

While the use of the verb “teach” reinforces the conceptualisation of the army as an extension of the education process, the question lies in understanding to whom this song is addressed. In fact, the identity of the speaker is revealed through the word “duty”, which stands for military conscription. This is an ordinary man asking the soldiers to teach him how to fight, indicating how the ethos of militarism is transmitted to the private sphere in the process of constructing the ideal man. This manufacturing of manhood is enhanced in this song by the reference to both gun and cannon, which celebrate a scarified image of the battlefield as a result of men’s readiness to die for the nation. The patriarchalisation of society is further reflected in considering the nation as the land of fathers, which obscures women’s national belonging and membership in the national community.

The idealisation of the military ethos is further reflected in drawing an image of tireless soldiers who stay awake to defend their fatherland:

The line of troops will stay up all night  
With soldiers, on the mountains, spending the night.  
With their hands, their fatherland they’ve built,  
And willingly they have got ready to kilt.  
They’ve early gone to the threshing floor  
To plant it all with men ready for war.

The permeation of bellicose language and imagery is expanded in these lines as they metaphorically conceptualise soldiers as active, autonomous and revolutionary. This image of men being planted like trees masculinises the public space and militarises the politics of inclusion and exclusion in the national imagining. The fulfilment of conceptualising men as ready for war and action is consistent with emergent demands for male power. While the image of planting men in “the threshing floor” assumes an picture of infinite brotherly solidarity, this construction of masculinised space of men is juxtaposed with the reference to finite national boundaries:

At your borders, my fatherland, here I am  
On full alert to be a faithful guardian.  
To be a guardian I would not cease,  
That all the clod of land enjoys peace  
Thus, you will be a legend, my fatherland,  
With your doors, so invincible and with dignity crowned.

This juxtaposition of an open space of men planted ready for war and the finite borders of the fatherland perpetuates an encompassing dominant picture of heroic men. The metaphor of men guarding the nation’s borders marks them as legendary and revolutionary. This constructed image of the fatherland as unchallenged and dignified simultaneously perpetuates hegemony and hierarchy. Men’s presentation as both guarding the nation at the borders and planted inside it emphasises their control over both the private and the public spheres, marking soldiers as protectors of women and the fatherland.

Another expression of internalised masculinity is emphasised in the following lines, in which men are conceived as planted in the mountains with “agility”:

My dear fatherland, marked by strife [*nidhal*] and dignity,  
Your mountains are planted with men and fire.  
Here I am, my land of grandfathers.

There is an association between fire and men that constructs an image of active and miraculous manhood. This bonding configures the fatherland as a domain encompassing only

militarised men. Such images of men associated with activity and agility determine who belongs to the nation and who does not; they also construct a code of particular behaviour for members of the nation, which defines the boundaries of national community.

#### **Construction of the ideal man: The leader, father and lover**

In the process of politicising the nation-state in Syria, these songs emphasised the role of heroic men, as their realisation of manhood is juxtaposed with the nation's realisation of its statehood. In this sense, the realisation of statehood is manifested in the construction of the ideal man as a signifier of national identity and group membership in the national community. Syrian nationalism determines the reciprocal relationship between manhood and nationalism, transmitted through the authority of men in public institutions (Aldoughli, 2017). This personification of man and the Ba'ath reinforces the masculinist construction of the Ba'ath ideology. Thus, the man is considered the sovereign, the leader and the superior.

This propagation of ideal Ba'athist man is reinforced by the contrast with those who are less heroic and not ready for physical sacrifice. This hierarchical order, reinforces hegemonic masculinity as manifested in delimiting superior and inferior men. This notion of competing masculinities is further expounded in nationalist songs, but this time by introducing the cult of the leader as a representative of the creation of statehood, and also as a superior leader of the men of the nation, which further excludes women.

The cult of Hafez al-Assad centred on willpower, patriotism, courage and valorous manliness. The narrative of these songs emphasises the “normative ideals of manhood” within the Syrian culture (Ahlbäck, 2016: 20). In Hafez al-Assad's cult, the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity demonstrates the hierarchical relationships between him and other men “where certain ways of being a man are considered superior and ‘manlier’ than others” (ibid.: 22). In other words, the cult of leadership exemplifies patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity and hierarchy.

Such notions of inherent patriarchy are demonstrated in nationalist songs through glorifying the role of Hafez al-Assad and his son, Bashar al-Assad. Some works have demonstrated the conflation of the creations of Hafez al-Assad's cult with the nation. In fact, this resonance between the celebration of the leader and the formulation of the nation was demonstrated in Wedeen's study (1999) of how al-Assad's cult works to "personify the state ... [and] to identify the mortal body of the leader with the immortal body of the realm" (1999: 16–17). While Wedeen's conception of the role of al-Assad's cult is addressed in the context of developing state institutions based on domination and transgression by idealising the conflation of party and leader (1999), Gilbert's conception of Bashar al-Assad's leadership cult is read within the narrative of the shifting national ideology from Arabism to statism (2013). However, Gilbert agreed that the leadership cult is seen as a marker of the birth of the nation (Hafez al-Assad) or the consolidation of local nationalism (Bashar al-Assad). Despite this interest in the leadership cult as an evolutionary process towards the creation of a nation-state, in the Syrian context there has been no study that investigates the role of this cult in reinforcing masculinism.

Moreover, this dominance of the father figure is intimately linked to what Sharabi called a modernised phenomenon of patriarchy – that is, "neo-patriarchy" (Sharabi, 1988: 7). More saliently, Hill notes that there is an association between the presidential cult that is reinforced and reproduced in the public domain and this inherent patriarchy in the family domain (1997: 129). However, this reinforcement of patriarchy in the cult of Hafez al-Assad is further supplanted in that of his son, Bashar al-Assad who is portrayed as a romantic lover. This symbolisation of his relationship with the people is emphasised by recurring images of him as a young, modern and thriving leader. Such depiction is reflected in how nationalist songs portray him as a god-like figure.



This symbolic creation of the president as father, military leader and lover in these nationalist songs exemplifies the regime's vision of representation and belonging and reflects the masculinisation of both the private and public spheres. This will be shown by demonstrating how both presidents have been configured and represented as definers of the identity of the Ba'ath Party and the fatherland. Within these songs dealing with the cult of leadership, their symbolic content that mythicises both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad as national heroes provides expressions of shared worship among members of the community.

#### **6.4.4.1 Hafez al-Assad as a heroic leader and a father**

##### **'Abu Bāssel Qa'idna (Abu Bāssel, Our Leader)**

The title of this song overtly identifies Hafez al-Assad as a father. While such customary identification is predominant in Arabic culture, the attempt to identify Hafez al-Assad by the name of his first son (*Abu Bassel*) implies the integrity of his personage as both a political leader and family figure. It asserts loyalty and belonging to the family and that the nation is a paternalist construct. Moreover, it configures the masses as sons of the father, which in turn gives him sacredness and legitimacy. Hafez al-Assad has been considered the driving force behind the establishment of party and state (Wedeen, 1999: 20–5), but this consideration was greatly extended to encompass the private sphere. Hafez al-Assad is recognised as the family patriarch, as reflected in the following excerpt, which demonstrates the overlap between his political leadership and patriarchal governance:

Abu Bāssel, our leader, with his forehead always uplifted,  
May you always be endowed with safety,  
That for the fatherland's safety you fight  
Against all the stabs of the evil night.

His political leadership is bestowed with heroism, chivalry and physical strength. His chivalric actions are further given a religious connotation by implying that his deeds are protected and guided by God. This association of religion with his cult produces a culture based on coercion and hierarchy. Moreover, Hafez al-Assad's militaristic character is

emphasised through the use of the word “sword” to refer to his physical strength, which also symbolises his manliness and further glorifies his heroism:

'Abu Bāssel is our hero across the land,  
With the sword of justice in his right hand.

This holy depiction of Hafez al-Assad is further reinforced in the following lines:

The light of his faith on us has shined,  
And in his eyes, God's gravity we always find.  
From our high mountains and their might  
His forehead has taken its pride and height.  
Our hopes have been shown on his forehead.

The political manifestation of hope and faith is embodied in his physical features, which further prototype him as a god-like figure. This omniscient configuration of his presence brings glorious victory to the fatherland. In turn, this creates an image of naturalised superiority that depicts Hafez al-Assad as a victorious leader gifted with mysterious power.

This mystification of his personality is further celebrated and indulged by nature. Not only is he the patriarch of the people, but also worshipped by the birds and flowers, thus extending his hegemony. The exaggeration in indulging his figure cannot be excluded from furthering the production of a hegemonic patriarchy based on enforcing submission and passivity:

Oh, birds of sky, do sing for him.  
About the chants of victory [*alhan al-bashayir*], do tell him.  
Do tell him before sunrise, ...  
Oh, flowers of the land show him your smiles,  
And do endow him with your precious scent,

These lines also reflect the process of mythicising Hafez al-Assad and conceptualising him as a holy figure. At the same time, this veneration of his unique accomplishments and abilities is guided by the supreme power of God:

Oh God, please on Assad bestow your assistance,

So that his den is marked with firm resistance [*samid*],  
And that he stays safe and protects our land,  
With the signs of peace in his right hand ...  
And his forehead would keep for long uplifted.  
With his words, we would be guided

Within these lines, his actions and words are projected as sacred and unmistakable since they stem from God's guidance. This sacredness is further intensified by embodying him as a war hero and a peacemaker at the same time. This ability to manage such unlimited and conflicting roles explains the god-like glorification that is accompanied by public mass-worship.

In this song, Hafez al-Assad is not only conceptualised as a great political leader, but also as the father of the nation; and masculinism and heroism as major characteristics of national belonging. This construction articulates a particular perception of national community that is masculinised and empowered only if it subscribes to traits of the heroic male fighter and patriarchal orders. In this sense, the masculinisation of national membership flows from the patriarchalisation of the presidential role that perpetuates manliness and heroism. In line with such analysis, the next song explores the legitimisation of the masculinist cult that venerates the symbolisation of Hafez al-Assad as the father of men (*rijaāl*), in turn reinforcing the masculinisation of the masses.

#### '*Abu 'Ar-rjāl*' (The Father of Men)

In line with what was discussed in the previous song, the name *Abu*<sup>5</sup> (father) is important as it emphasises Hafez al-Assad's patriarchal role as a father to his first son (Basel), but more importantly, as the father of men ('*Abu al-rjāl*'), which extends the masculinisation of the cult. This leads us to question whether such a configuration of his role as the father of men

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<sup>5</sup> Abu is a nickname used to call fathers by the name of their first son.

masculinises belonging and conceptualises the national community as an aggregation of men only – as the following lines explore:

Love has unified people.  
Long live Syria, forever.  
Long live Hafez Al-Assad, forever.  
He is the father of men and competence.

These lines draw a parallel between the glorification of the fatherland and the configuration of Hafez al-Assad as the father of men (*rijāal*). In such a parallel the leader personifies the nation. Moreover, the configuration of men as his sons is associated with national victory and dignity:

With flags and dignity.  
It is always sublime protected  
With strong hands and awoken eyes ...  
Our days are full of cheerfulness and victory,  
And our dignity has emerged from his steps.

Another symbol that perpetuates a masculinist conception of national community and membership is the use of the word “hands” to represent men’s deeds in building the country. This configuring of al-Assad as the sole patriarch and political leader of both the private and the public spheres implies that the nation is an arena composed of a father and his sons and excludes women. Moreover, once again in this song the reference to the flag is intimately linked with men’s achievements, which subsequently marginalise women in the national imagining.

#### ***Tislam Lish-sha'b (May You Be Protected for Your People)***

This cult of fatherhood and leadership is further intensified by projecting Hafez al-Assad as embodying the fatherland’s glorious past. What is evident in this song is the veneration of the sacred relationship between leader and people, which is marked by sacredness and hierarchy. The first excerpt worships the leader’s presence:

May you be protected for your people, oh Hafez,

As you are the hope of millions.  
You have raised our flags, oh Hafez,  
And mustered our dignity, oh Hafez.  
May you be protected for your people, oh Hafez.

These words signify the excessive love towards the leader as if his presence is indispensable to the nation's improvement. He is conceived as a father-like figure that his family depends on and cannot live without. He is further perceived as the only source of hope and dignity for the nation. It is unclear if the term "people" is here an exclusively masculinist construct or gender-inclusive. However, the following lines make it clear what type of relationship is identified between the leader and the people:

Syria is the country of free men.  
Syria is the country of revolutionaries.  
Your goals [oh, Hafez] are "Unity, Freedom"  
And gathering the whole Arab nation.  
As long as Hafez is our leader, be proud and please, oh Arab people.

As already emphasised, the nation is perceived as an extension of the family, yet the role of women is disregarded. A striking example of this gender bias is in defining Syria as the country of "free men" and "revolutionaries", which in turn casts women as outsiders. Clearly, women are overlooked in this patriotic song and, rather, the leader–people relationship is identified with the father–son relationship that is marked by superiority and hierarchy. While this patriarchalisation of the nation legitimises dominance and coercion, it also affirms the liminality of women in national imagining.

Further demonstration of glorifying al-Assad in this song is that, by giving him the title of Arab leader, he is conceived not only as an inspiration to Syrian men but rather the source of hope and dignity for all Arab nations. This primacy given to the excessive worship of al-Assad's achievements goes beyond Syria's borders to include the whole Arab nation. Such emphasis on constructing a god-like figure that is magnificent and autonomous reaffirms the hierarchical order within both the private and public spheres.

### **The cult of love and subordination: Bashar al-Assad as a lover**

This section aims to highlight the shift in the conceptualisation of leadership and its perpetuation of masculinism in the cult of Bashar al-Assad. While the image of Hafez al-Assad endorsed in nationalist songs affirms his roles as a father, leader and warrior, with Bashar al-Assad, the following song portrays him as an attractive lover. When he took power in 2000, he was the youngest president in the Arab world and could not be configured as a father figure but rather as a young, modern leader who would take his country to prosperity. Another reason is that nationalism was predominantly about garnering legitimacy by establishing the state during the rule of the father, whereas with the son it was and is about the consolidation of the state.

The constructed relationship between Bashar al-Assad and the nation is based on romanticism and affection, but in the patriarchal context there is still a hierarchical order that recognises men as controlling and superior, while women are submissive and subordinate. This configuration of Bashar al-Assad as a lover can be seen in the following nationalist song.

#### ***Minhibbāk (We Love You)***

This song propagates a romanticised relationship between the leader and the masses. From the title, one can discern two interpretations: one that deals with relationships and the other with representation. It explores how the symbolic relationship between ruler and ruled is configured as a romantic one based on coercion and hierarchy. Moreover, in terms of representation, it demonstrates how the “people” as a group identity are constructed, and whether women are included.

Starting with the use of romantic symbolism between the leader and the people, the following lines reveal how this constructed romantic relationship has been a way of inducing people’s loyalty and obedience:

We are all your kin and your people  
In prosperity and adversity, we would be by you  
We support you, so go on. We love you. We love you.

Despite drawing a romanticised conception of the leader–people relationship that is synonymous with that of man–woman, the first line reaffirms the familial ties that link the leader to his people. Such reinforcement legitimises patriarchal authority and consolidates cultural hierarchy within both the private and public spheres. Such identification follows the early Syrian national narrative that identifies the man with the nation. However, it is not only a matter of endorsing the nation with the man, but of conceptualising his masculinity, achievement and glory as defining the nation. Moreover, this cult of love is internalised with masculinism and hegemony. This is evident in how this song perceives Bashar al-Assad as a national symbol of unification, hope, dignity and glory:

We love you, oh the very great man.  
We love you, oh the symbol of our homeland.  
We love you, oh the man with a very big heart.  
Your heart is as big as our homeland.  
We love you because you have emerged among us,  
And we are similar to you.  
We love you because you are our leader, unifier and Assad  
Forever, forever, forever.

It is no wonder that the idea behind repeating the phrase “we love you” is to institutionalise ultimate obedience and submissiveness. On the representational level, Bashar al-Assad’s cult registers the paradox between the “you” and the “we”, that is, the leader and the people. This cult incarnates state formation with Bashar al-Assad, but this personification is based on the internalisation between the leader and the people. It emulates al-Assad’s authority and simultaneously works to represent the connection between the masculinised leader and the feminised masses.

However, these words not only define the superiority of Bashar al-Assad, but also masculinise national belonging and identity as they become synonymous with the leader’s

personal image. This incorporation of the love between the leader and the people obscures the definition of membership. Such authority, symbolised by political leadership and familial patriarchy, casts women as submissive within the private and public spheres. Moreover, this creation of a romantic relationship between the nation and the leader perpetuates women's subservience to a male-dominated nationalism, familial hierarchy and a masculinised belonging.

A related question is how this song defines the people; the "we". Who *are* the people? In fact, this song defines not only the relationship between the leader and the people, but also who "the people" are:

We are the dear promise, the guardians of the nights.  
Oh, the man with the uplifted forehead,  
We are the sun that shines, the sword that glows  
We are the determination that never gives up.

The repetition of "we" is suggestive of the different roles and identifications given to those who embody this term, and "we" is rather restricted to the role of guardianship and fighting. In fact, how the "we" is constructed in this context is connoted with building an ideal image of the man. This is visible in reference to the army and sword. Such use leaves no room for doubt over the masculinisation of the "we", which denotes physical strength.

Further configuration of the people as a group of men is echoed in the following lines:

We are the government focusing on education.  
We are the symbol of love.  
Oh, guardian of our people's dignity, we love you. We love you.  
We are the eye that never sleeps, always awake to guard Al-Sham  
Whatever hardships we may face, we love you.

The symbolic displays of the "people" here generate gender boundaries based on configuring strong men as those who are worthy of national love, belonging and identity. The repetitive "we" in these lines masculinises peoplehood through identifying them with the sword, which



underlines physical strength. Hence, the relationship between the leader and the masses is measured by subscription to masculinist values and ethos.

In line with the above, this song explores the politics of representation and relationship, which reveal the masculinisation of belonging, identity and membership. Thus, this song encapsulates the relationship between the masculinised leader and the feminised nation, which in turn symbolises hierarchy within both the private and the public spheres. It also highlights the configuration of “people” as a dichotomised construct between those who are ready to guard the nation and those who are not.

## Conclusion

In these songs, the nation is perceived as a familial entity, reflecting the association between masculinist characteristics measured by conceptualising men as both political and patriarchal guardians; and the production of gender boundaries in both the public and private spheres. In this sense, songs have increasingly become a prominent form of discourse in the field of national identity that stimulate the communal experience of struggle, pain and suffering. The attempt to impose traits of patriotism and nationalist consciousness is characterised by a recuperative tendency to celebrate a national identity defined by selective achievements, in particular military victories and physical strength.

By analysing these nationalist songs, one can say that they reconceptualise the past as a tale of sacrifice and create an emotional atmosphere filled with the spirit of comradeship and militarism. While reviving the nation’s past involves a selective approach to its history, the configuration of heroic leaders from the past is connoted with the celebration of muscular strength that further underscores women’s marginalisation. As these songs are heavy with references to glory, heroism and sacrifice as synonyms for courageous death, this

symbolic construction of national belonging has therefore proved to be masculinist by dictating military values.

While the focus has been on the growing violent crisis in Syria – ranging from sectarianism and terrorism to human trafficking and the influx of refugees – and the international community’s response to it, symbolism in the context of masculinism and gender bias has been disregarded, at least as a research topic. The songs analysed in this paper is therefore an invitation for further research on how Syrian national identity and belonging had been constructed prior to 2011.

Moreover, research is needed to shed light on other forms of political symbolism propagated by the Ba'ath state not only to legitimise its rule but also to reinforce the secondary status of women. There is a need to highlight the importance of analysing how political symbols are produced and mobilised to generate and shape identities. This is also particularly important during the period of the Syrian Uprising to address the ways in which Syrian identity is evolving and emerging from the hegemony of Ba'athist institutions.

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